Genre Analysis of Editorial Letters to International Journal Contributors

1JOHN FLOWERDEW and 2TONY DUDLEY-EVANS
1City University of Hong Kong and 2formerly University of Birmingham, UK

This paper presents the results of a genre analysis of the summative editorial letter—the letter that journal editors write to authors when sending out reviews and giving their decision regarding publication. Following the methodology developed by Swales and Bhatia, 53 letters written by a co-editor of a leading Applied Linguistics journal were examined in terms of their schematic structure and linguistic and politeness strategies. Based upon this analysis, it is concluded that there may be difficulties in interpretation due to a lack of clarity in the schematic structuring of some of the letters and the use of face-saving strategies on the part of the editor when presenting criticisms and suggestions for revision. Given that the study is based on the letters of one editor, no generalizations can be made. However, the study provides a baseline from which future studies can be measured. As such it increases our knowledge of the academic genres.

INTRODUCTION

For a considerable time now, English has been the dominant language of international scientific research. To be successful, scientists need to be able to access the literature, which will invariably be published in English, and to be able to disseminate the findings of their own research through the leading international journals, which, again, are likely to be published in English. In a survey conducted by Flowerdew (1999) among university academic staff members across all the disciplines, not just the natural sciences, one of the findings was that it is not only scientists who need to publish in English, but increasingly, also, scholars in the social sciences and humanities (see also Burgess 1997, 2002). This tendency towards international publication in the social sciences and humanities can be linked in with the more general trend towards globalization, as manifested in the mass media, entertainment, the Internet, and international trade, business, and tourism, among other areas.

Concomitant with this need to publish research in English, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) movement was developed (see e.g. Jordan 1997). One important area of activity within this movement has been research into the discourse structure and functions of the various genres most commonly used in the academy (e.g. Swales 1990; Flowerdew 2002; many of the papers published in English for Specific Purposes Journal). The goal of this research has been to provide input to EAP course design. While a lot of this work has
focused on the research article (Flowerdew 2002: 5), more recently, attention has begun to be given to some of the other genres (see e.g. Flowerdew 1994 on lectures), including genres which Swales (1996) has referred to as ‘occluded’, that is to say, not open to public scrutiny, for example, job applications, submission letters, and curriculum vitae.

In their recent guide to writing, ‘English in today’s research world’, Swales and Feak (2000) describe their approach as ‘genre based’ (p. vi). In the first chapter of their book the authors present a diagram consisting of two genre ‘networks’. The first network provides a representative sample of ‘open’ genres, that is, ‘genres that are public, often published and easily visible or audible and typically appear on a researcher’s CV’. Below this first network is a second which shows what are referred to as ‘supporting genres’, ‘genres that operate to support or assist an academic or research career’. These genres had traditionally remained ‘hidden’ and ‘outside the public domain’, explain Swales and Feak (2000: 8). Swales and Feak also point out that these genres can be particularly problematic for ‘junior scholars’ (2000: 9).

It is interesting to note that while Swales and Feak include ‘research paper reviews’ and ‘comments to reviewers’ among the hidden genres in this network, the genre of ‘editor’s letter’ is not included. This omission is somewhat surprising, as such letters are important in determining the fate of journal submissions, success or failure in which can be critical for an academic career. Swales (personal communication, November 2001) has stated that the editorial letter was not included as a genre because the authors ‘didn’t have a big enough corpus to make any claims’ (although this genre does not appear in the diagram, a made-up example is discussed (see Swales and Feak 2000: 248–9)).

One researcher to focus on the summative editorial letter is Hamp-Lyons. Hamp-Lyons (1996) has suggested that miscommunication between editors and authors is common for both native and non-native writers (for a study of science editors’ reactions to non-native speaker manuscripts see Gosden 1992). A co-editor of English for Specific Purposes Journal, Hamp-Lyons (1997) analysed a sample of her own editorial letters in an attempt to understand what might be making them difficult for authors to deconstruct and interpret. She found that although such letters contained predictable moves, there were subtle patterns of hedging using complex shades of grammatical relations that sometimes obscured the editor’s message. Such ‘occluded’ messages often unintentionally deter contributors from revising and resubmitting their work, Hamp-Lyons concluded.

The study to be reported in this article is an analysis of a corpus of summative editorial letters written by another of the co-editors of English for Specific Purposes Journal (also co-editor of this paper), Tony Dudley-Evans. There are three main justifications for the study. The first is that there is concern that the whole process of submission of a manuscript—the review by peers and the need for revision of the manuscript before it can be published—
may be a confusing and dispiriting process, especially for inexperienced scholars.

The second justification is that the editorial letter described above seems an ideal candidate for a genre study along the lines of Swales’s (1996) study of initial submission letters. Swales (1993, 1996) refers to a number of stages in the publication process—the editor’s letter to the reviewer, the actual review, the editor’s summative letter to the author—that he suggests have ‘their own generic sub-systems’ (Swales 1996: 46) that often remain unavailable for public scrutiny or ‘occluded’. We agree with Swales that these occluded genres are worthy of study, and that, as they are relatively straightforward with a clear and limited purpose, the components are easily identified. In examining the submission letter, Swales identifies ten components, each of which appears in his corpus (65 letters) at least five times. He does not include terms of address and closing salutations in the list of components.

The present study is thus a straightforward genre study in the tradition of Swales’s (1981, 1990) and Bhatia’s (1993) work that sets up categories (moves) that reflect the editor’s communicative purposes in the letter. Genre analysis has moved on quite a distance since the early work on the journal article introduction and sales promotion letter and has been increasingly influenced by work in the area of sociology of knowledge or science (e.g. Gilbert and Mulkay 1984; Mulkay 1991; Gross 1991; Latour and Woolgar 1986). This had led to a concern with questions of definition of discourse community, how students can be socialized into the discourse community they aspire to join, and how writers manipulate the genre conventions to achieve their own individual professional purposes (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). It is no longer valid to present a study that focuses on the moves that a writer uses without a consideration of the role of the writer in the discourse community and the expectations of that community. For instance, studies such as those by Myers (1985) and Bazerman (1989) blend both linguistic and sociological observation but without attempting the detailed analysis that a move analysis approach entails. Genre analysis has thus become a much more ambitious and wide-ranging approach to text than the early concentration on moves in the different sections of the journal article and certain kinds of business letter. Indeed it has been found that a move approach is less valid for other academic genres such as the essay (Hewings 1999), the dissertation (Dudley-Evans 1986; Thompson 1999), and even for the abstract (Salager-Meyer 1990; Ayers 1993), where there is great variety in the moves adopted by different writers.

While we welcome this broader scope for genre analysis, we still feel that a move approach is valid for the limited and short genres with a focused number of rhetorical options available to the writer of the genre. We note that Swales adopts the more general term ‘component’ rather than ‘move’ in his study of submission letters. Given that the components we have identified in the summative editorial letter seem to occur in a regular sequence, we have chosen to continue to use the term ‘move’.
A third justification for the study derives from the fact that one of the authors of this paper has also been able to act as a specialist informant for the project. He was co-editor of *English for Specific Purposes Journal* for a long period and in fact wrote all of the editorial letters analysed in this study. It has occasionally been suggested that ESP research should sometimes look at applied linguistics (Swales 1988), as difficulties for the research in understanding the content and the writer’s intention would be reduced. We believe the study of the summative editorial letter is thus a particularly fertile ground for research.

Although it might be argued that our sample is not representative of the genre, in so far as the corpus is made up of the writings of one individual, we would argue that what it loses in breadth, it gains in depth (i.e. in the insights of the producer of the texts in question). We acknowledge, however, that no generalizations are possible from the results of our findings. Rather, we would claim that our paper offers a qualitative study of how one editor constructs his editorial letters. Further studies would be needed to determine to what extent the practices of this individual are common to other editors in general.

**BACKGROUND TO THE EDITING PROCEDURE**

To begin, it may be useful to summarize briefly the whole editing procedure, insofar as it concerns the *English for Specific Purposes Journal*. It is as follows. When a manuscript is received, it is prepared for blind review by having the name(s) of the author(s) removed, plus occasionally any references that may give strong clues about the author’s identity. The editor then selects two reviewers, usually members of the editorial board who have expressed interest in the subject area, but also occasionally people from outside the board with a particular expertise or interest in the topic of the manuscript. The ‘blinded’ manuscript is then sent out to the reviewers, who in turn send back their reviews within a specified time period—usually two to three months. The editor will then read through the manuscript and the reports and write the editorial letter, the main purpose of which is to convey the editor’s decision about the manuscript and to provide both a summary of the reviews and suggestions for revision of the manuscript.

There are occasional articles that do not merit being sent out for review, either because they are concerned with a topic outside the area of interest of the journal (for example, an article was once received on the teaching of poetry) or because there are major faults with the manuscript that the editor feels would have to be rectified before he could ask reviewers to spend considerable time reviewing the manuscript. Such a manuscript would either be rejected outright or suggestions for extensive revision would be made.

When a revised manuscript comes in, the editor will make the decision as to whether he can review it on his own or whether it needs to be sent for further review, usually by one or both of the reviewers of the original. If the revisions are relatively minor, it is likely that the editor will review the manuscript; if
they are major, it is more likely that the manuscript will be sent out for further review.

EDITORIAL LETTERS

The editorial letters of the journal in question are often quite extensive in scope and aim to provide clear guidance to the authors when they come to revise the manuscript. In this way, they reflect something of the philosophy of the editors and the editorial board of the journal. From its very first issue the journal has aimed to mirror the international nature of the profession and this approach emerged very strongly as a key element of the journal’s mission in the time of the editorships of John Swales and Ann Johns. The policy has aimed to encourage the publication of articles from as varied a range of countries as possible and from as many NNSs as possible. Whilst it is true that a majority of articles are still written by university lecturers in a developed country, the journal has undoubtedly been successful in increasing the number of articles from countries outside the developed world, and probably publishes more articles of this kind than most other journals in the field of Applied Linguistics. The policy has not, however, led to any relaxation in the requirement for high standards in publication. Indeed the extensive nature of the editorial letters and the very detailed advice contained in them results from the need to ensure quality control.

The stance that the editors of the journal adopt is thus that of a concerned editor anxious to help the authors make the necessary corrections to enable their article to be published. The role is still that of the gatekeeper, but one that is anxious that the barriers should be broken down, or at least that the authors provide sufficient evidence to enable them to pass through the gate unimpeded.

There are various types of letter that the editor may write. As noted above, in a few cases the editor may decide that the manuscript does not merit the asking of reviewers to spend valuable time reviewing the article. The editor will thus send a rejection letter. It is not, however, unusual for the editor to invite resubmission once certain changes have been made. A typical situation of this kind is where a manuscript has been submitted by a young academic (or non-academic) without very much experience of academic writing or of the expectations of the journal. He may have the germ of an interesting idea but will need to look at a copy of the journal itself to assess what issues are of interest to its readers, or add important items to the survey of the literature.

In the more common situation where the manuscript has been reviewed, the editor has four choices:

1. accepting the manuscript without change;
2. inviting the authors to resubmit the article once the changes suggested by the reviewers and editors have been made;
accepting/inviting the authors to resubmit the article as a Research Note (a shorter article that does not follow all the conventions of a full article); rejecting the article.

The main function of the editorial letter is to convey which of the above decisions the editor has reached after reading the reviews and manuscript. Outright acceptance or rejection are rare and the invitation to resubmit is the most common decision. But a key aspect here is whether the editor is seriously considering publication after the changes have been made or whether the suggestions are made more to encourage the authors to appraise their research and perhaps take a different direction. Given the philosophy outlined above, the editors are usually happy to receive a resubmission, and indeed it is becoming increasingly common for manuscripts to be resubmitted.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES JOURNAL AND THE EDITORIAL PRACTICES OF OTHER JOURNALS

Given the fact that the letters which make up the corpus for the analysis in this article were all written by the co-editor of one journal, as already mentioned, no generalizations can be made about the summative editorial letter within the field of Applied Linguistics. Nevertheless, some contextualization of the journalistic practices of English for Specific Purposes Journal vis-à-vis other journals in the field may give a sense of how representative it might be. The above section describing the review of manuscripts, we believe, is fairly consistent with journals we ourselves and colleagues have dealt with. Applied Linguistics and TESOL Quarterly adopt a similar procedure of blind review, as does Language Learning. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, on the other hand, while also adopting blind review, has an initial screening process, where a manuscript is sent out to a single reviewer first to determine whether it merits further review. The Journal of Second Language Writing is an interesting case, in that the letters are signed by both co-editors and are accordingly written in the first person plural. Letters from this journal would appear to use a template, which is adapted to provide individual feedback. It is not clear to us to what extent other journals might use a template. What is certain, however, is that the writer of the letters in this study composes each letter individually.

The editorial letters we have looked at from these journals are very similar in their schematic structure to the ones to be analysed here. As far as we can determine, the options available to editors in the decisions they convey are fairly consistent with those used by English for Specific Purposes Journal, as described above. English for Specific Purposes Journal, however, differs from other journals insofar as it can ask writers to resubmit articles as a research note. Nevertheless, similar options are available to Applied Linguistics, which now has a Forum section (Claire Kramsch, personal communication), and TESOL Quarterly has various other sections for more minor articles; the editor of this journal may also refer articles to its sister publication, TESOL Journal.
(Carol Chapelle, personal communication). One option we have noted which certain other editors make use of is to recommend that a submission be sent to another named journal or journals. A further move employed by some other editors is to ask the contributor to send with a resubmission a covering letter itemizing how the writer has responded to the reviewers’ concerns. These two possibilities are not used in any of the letters in the present corpus, however. As regards length, the letters which we have looked at from other journals appear to be very similar to those of English for Specific Purposes Journal. Other possible forms of variation might include questions of multiple authorship, statistical and sampling issues, and the use of illustrations and photographs.

GENRE ANALYSIS

Our corpus comprises 53 letters written by Tony Dudley-Evans, co-editor of English for Specific Purposes Journal. It consists of a total of 19,786 words. The average letter has a length of 373 words, the longest at 797 words and the shortest at 92 words. In our analysis of the corpus of letters, we focus on two aspects which we think to be of most significance. These are: (1) the schematic structure—both a quantitative analysis of the whole corpus and a qualitative analysis of two letters in detail; and (2) the linguistic features and, in particular, how they realize the interpersonal dimension of the communication.

Schematic structure

Linguistic approaches to genre analysis have used the notion of schematic structure, or staging, in mapping the macro-structure of texts (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; Hasan 1977, 1979, 1984; Martin 1989; Ventola 1987). According to this approach, genres are characterized in terms of the communicative purposes which they fulfil. Individual instances of genres, or texts, can in turn be broken down into the stages which together serve to perform these functions. In an early model of schematic structure, for example, Swales (1990) specified the following series of stages, or ‘moves’, (along with their component ‘steps’) for the introductions to academic research articles:

Establishing a territory
   Claiming centrality
   And/or
   Making topic generalization(s)
   And/or
   Reviewing items of previous research

Establishing a niche
   Counter-claiming
   Or
   Indicating a gap
   Or
   Question raising
Or
Continuing a tradition
Occupying the niche
Outlining purposes
Or
Announcing present research
Announcing principal findings
Indicating RA structure

Similarly, Bhatia (1993) proposed the following schematic structure of moves and steps for sales letters in business communication:

Establishing credentials
Introducing the offer
  Offering the product or service
  Essential detailing of the offer
  Indicating value of the offer
Offering incentives
Enclosing documents
Soliciting response
Using pressure tactics
Ending politely

Schematic structures are prototypes which can be subject to different amounts of variation according to the degree to which the genre is conventionalized (Swales 1990). In most genres, moves will be either obligatory or optional; they may be in a fixed or variable sequence, they may be subject to embedding one within the other, and they may be recursive (Swales 1990).

It is generally agreed that the more conventional a genre is—that is, the more constrained its communicative purposes are—the more predictable will be its schematic structure. As a genre with a clearly defined communicative purpose—to convey editorial decisions—editorial letters are highly amenable to schematic structure analysis. One of the purposes of such an analysis will be to examine to what extent the letters in the corpus correspond to the prototype and to what degree there is variation.

Here we will describe and exemplify the schematic structure of the letters which make up the corpus. Figure 1 is a schematic representation of what we posit as the prototypical structure, while Table 1 provides frequency data from the corpus for each of the moves and steps.

As Figure 1 shows, the letters in the corpus have four basic moves, only one of which is optional (3). These are:

1 preparing the reader for the decision;
2 conveying the decision;
3 making recommendations for revision/improvement;
4 signing off.

We will look at each of these moves in turn.
Figure 1: Schematic representation of prototypical structure

1 Preparing reader for decision *
   1 refer to submission *
   AND/OR
   2 apologize for delay
   AND/OR
   3 interpret reviewers’ reports

2 Conveying decision *
   1 accept
   OR
   2 offer resubmission
   OR
   3 accept as a research note
   OR
   4 reject (+/− mitigate; +/- justify)

3 Making recommendations for revision #
   1 refer reader to reviewers’ recommendations
   AND/OR
   2 make editorial recommendations

4 Signing off *
   1 confirm decision
   AND/OR
   2 mitigate bad news
   AND/OR
   3 apologize for delay
   AND/OR
   4 refer to enclosure
   AND/OR
   5 refer to personal matters
   AND/OR
   6 present a deadline
   AND/OR
   7 suggest further contact
   AND/OR
   8 give encouragement

* obligatory; # optional
Table 1: Frequency of moves and steps in the corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Preparing reader for decision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refer to submission</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apologize for delay</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpret reviewers’ reports</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Conveying decision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accept</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offer resubmit</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accept as research note</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reject(+/- mitigate, +/- justify)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Making recommendations for revision</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refer to reviewers’ recommendations</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make editorial recommendations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 Signing off</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confirm decision</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mitigate bad news</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apologize for delay</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refer to enclosure</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refer to personal matter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present a deadline</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suggest further contact</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give encouragement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Move 1: preparing the reader for the decision

This move may be realized by means of one or more of three steps:

1 referring to the submission;
2 apologizing for a delay in responding;
3 interpreting reviewers’ reports.

The first of these steps, ‘referring to the submission’ is obligatory, occurring in all letters in the corpus. The other two steps are optional, but with ‘interpreting reviewers’ reports’ (41 occurrences) being more frequent than
'apologizing for a delay' (19 occurrences). The sequencing of the three steps is fairly predictable, but allows for some variation. Out of the 53 letters, 44 have ‘refer to submission’ in initial position; in the nine cases where ‘refer to submission’ is not in initial position, it is preceded by step 2, ‘apologize for delay’. Step 3, ‘interpret reviewers' reports’, on the other hand, appears in all 41 occurrences in final position. Example 1 from the corpus illustrates the standard pattern, as follows:

Example 1

STEP 1
Title of paper
I am enclosing the two reports on the above manuscript.
STEP 2
I must apologise for the delay in getting these to you.
STEP 3
Both reports present very full and, I hope, helpful comments on your manuscript. (letter #2)

Example 2, which does not include step 2, has the following linguistic realization of move 1:

Example 2

STEP 1
I am enclosing the two reports on your manuscript, X.
STEP 3
As you will see, the reports are divided, with one recommending publication after substantial revisions and the other recommending rejection. (letter #20)

In some cases, two steps may overlap. Letter #22, for example, while first ‘apologising for a delay’ (step 2), at the same time incorporates an element of step 1 ‘referring to the submission’.

Example 3

STEP 2
I am sorry it has taken longer than promised to respond to your manuscript.

As an aside here, it is worth mentioning that the paragraphing of the letters does not necessarily correspond to move boundaries (Bhatia 1993: 56), although it often does.

Move 2: conveying the decision

Move 2 is where the overall communicative purpose of the letter is expressed, the decision on the fate of the submission. As already indicated, the editor may choose here from four mutually exclusive options:
accepting;
offering the possibility of resubmission;
accepting/inviting the author to resubmit the article as a research note;
rejecting.

Where move 2 is an acceptance, it is usually expressed briefly in a single sentence. The following are examples of acceptances:

Example 4

I think that this article will be acceptable after you have revised it taking the suggestions of the reports and this letter into account. (letter #6)

Example 5

I am happy to be able to tell you that we will be able to offer you publication in the journal once you have taken account of the reviewers’ comments. (letter #40)

Notice, however, as the above examples indicate, that even acceptances are usually made on the condition that some sort of revisions are undertaken.

Offers of the opportunity to resubmit invite a revised version of the paper, but, unlike acceptances, resubmissions may be subject to a further round of reviews. The following are examples of offers of the opportunity to resubmit:

Example 6

I would be very interested in receiving a revised version of the paper, but, as the paper will have to be substantially different from this one, it would be necessary to send it out for further reports. (letter #26)

Example 7

Having read through your article, I feel that, provided substantial revisions are made along the lines suggested in the more positive report and in this letter, we could have a publishable paper here. I would, however, have to send a revised version of the paper out for further review before making a final decision. (letter #20)

In two letters from the corpus, however, (letters #35 and #46), the editor invites a revised version of the paper, but in neither of these cases does he state whether further review would be required.

Example 8

I find that I agree with the second review that recommends publication after substantial revision. (letter #35)
Example 9

As you will see, both reviews regard the work as very interesting and worthy of publication in ESJP. Both, however, also ask for a number of changes to the manuscript. I would therefore ask you to consider these carefully and submit a revised manuscript. (letter #46)

This is an example of the vagueness which is a feature of many of the letters in our corpus, we would claim. When asked about this, the editor said that he would use his judgement when the manuscript came back and see if it needed further review at that stage.

A further category of decision (3 examples in the corpus) is where the editor suggests that a paper may be better included as a research note (as already noted, a special type of paper in English for Specific Purposes Journal, usually shorter than a full article). The next citation is an example of how the offer of resubmission as a potential research note can be made:

Example 10

I think that the suggestion of rewriting the paper as a Research Note made by the longer report is an excellent one. (letter #37)

The next pair of examples shows how rejections are realized:

Example 11

I am afraid we [the editors and reviewers] reach the unanimous decision that there are problems with the study and therefore we cannot recommend publication. (letter #14)

Example 12

[I have now read the manuscript entitled . . .] I am afraid that it is not really suitable for publication in ESPJ. (letter #34)

Just as, as we have already seen, with regard to move 1, the steps in a move may overlap, so may moves overlap one with another. The following extract, for example, has move 2 ‘conveying the decision’ combined with step 3 ‘interpret reviewers’ reports’ of move 1 ‘preparing the reader for the decision’, that is to say that the decision is conveyed by means of the reference to the reviewers’ reports:

Example 13

MOVE 1, STEP 1
I am enclosing the reports on your manuscript entitled X, plus a copy of the paper with my suggestions for rephrasing.

MOVE 1, STEP 2
I must begin by apologising for the time it has taken me to reply to your
submission, especially as I cannot bring you good news.

MOVE 1, STEP 3/MOVE 2

The report and my own reading of the paper indicate that the paper is not ready for publication in ESPJ. (letter #12)

This letter is another example of the vagueness attaching to some of the letters. It is not clear to the contributor what course of action is expected. The paper ‘is not ready’ for publication, the editor states. But does that mean that with revision it will be? Would an inexperienced contributor know how to read this signal, especially when the editor also states that he ‘cannot bring you good news’?

In another example from the corpus, the move 2 slot appears to be empty. The editor realizes move 1, ‘preparing for the decision’, but then goes straight to move 3, ‘making recommendations for revision’. It is only after move 3 that the decision is overtly signalled, as follows:

Example 14

MOVE 1, STEP 2 Thank you for being patient over the delay with the second report. MOVE 1, STEP 1 Your manuscript had apparently got stuck at the bottom of a pile of papers. MOVE 1, STEP 3 But the reader has now done a very thorough job and has some useful suggestions. MOVE 3 STEP 1 I agree with everything that he says and particularly with the point about the importance of . . . MOVE 3, STEP 2 It is an original point and worth making more of . . . My only concern is . . . MOVE 2 So what I am saying here is that we are definitely interested in publishing the paper provided these changes are made. MOVE 4 Our next deadline is . . . It was good to see you . . . (letter #39)

Perhaps because of the desire to maintain face (an issue we will discuss further below), not all letters are clear as to whether a decision is an outright rejection or the offer of the possibility of resubmission. The following is move 2 in letter #26:

Example 15

I am afraid that we cannot accept the present paper, but would encourage you to continue with this research. As report 2 suggests, it will be difficult to revise the existing paper without conducting further surveys. (letter #26)

To gloss this move, the editor first tells the contributor that her/his article cannot be accepted. But he then goes on to say that he would encourage her/him to continue with her/his research. A possible resubmission is then hinted at, by the mention of a possible revision of the paper. But this is counter-balanced by the observation that new surveys would be needed. From the contributor’s point of view, these conflicting signals must make it difficult to evaluate what course of action is being recommended.
Move 3: making recommendations for revision

Move 3, ‘making recommendations for revision’, may be realized by either or both of the following options:

1 by referring the reader to the reviewers’ recommendations;
2 by making editorial recommendations of the editor’s own.

The ordering of these two steps is optional and they may be embedded one within the other. In letters #20 and #26, for example, we have step 1 followed by step 2.

Example 16

STEP 1
I particularly agree with the suggestion (of one of the reviewers) that you need to be more explicit about . . .

STEP 2
Two other articles that I feel that you need to look and refer to in your manuscript are: . . . (letter #20)

Example 17

STEP 1
Both reports are critical of the length of the literature review and of the fact that many of the references are quite old.

STEP 2
I think that the review of the literature could be pruned without too much difficulty. (letter #26)

While in letter #53 we have step 2 followed by step 1.

Example 18

STEP 2
The two main problems (with the article) are . . .

STEP 1
I agree with the point made in Report 2 that . . . (letter #53)

In letter #20, on the other hand, we have steps 1 and 2 embedded one within the other. In this letter, the editor first notes that the reviewers are divided, one recommending rejection and the other a revised version. The editor states that he agrees with the latter. He then lists a number of points the writer needs to address, some of his own and others mentioned by the reviewers:

Example 19 (partly cited already in Example 2)

As you will see, the reports are divided, with one recommending publication after substantial revisions and the other recommending rejection.
Having read through your article, I feel that, provided substantial revisions are made along the lines suggested in the more positive report and in this letter, we could have a publishable paper here.

... particularly agree with the suggestion that you need to be more explicit about the approach to needs analysis used and to discuss ... in more detail. There are other approaches to needs analysis in EOP that I think that you should also refer to ... (letter #20)

Move 4: signing off

The signing off move is where the editor takes his leave. However, this move can also perform a large range of other functions, some of which are transactional—confirming a decision, setting a deadline for a revised paper/resubmission, suggesting/offering further communication, referring to an enclosure—and others, some of which are interpersonal—mitigating a negative decision, apologizing for a delay in responding, and (where the editor personally knows the contributor) personal comments.

To give just a few examples of these various steps, in letter #14, which is a rejection, we have (1) mitigation of a negative decision and (2) offer of further communication.

Example 20

(1) I realise that this will come as a particular disappointment as you have put in a lot of work revising the manuscript. (2) If you would like to discuss this further you have my e-mail address. (letter #14)

In letter #7 we have (1) an apology for delay, (2) reference to a deadline, (3) confirmation of acceptance and (4) reference to an enclosure.

Example 21

(1) I am sorry that it has taken so long for me to get these comments to you. (2) If you make these corrections by the end of the year, (3) we should be able to get the paper into [issue X] due at the publishers in [date] and out in the autumn.

(4) I enclose an annotated copy to indicate the changes I have suggested. (letter #7)

In letter #18 we have (1) a reference to a deadline (albeit saying that one is not needed), (2) confirmation of acceptance, and (3) a personal reference.

Example 22

(1) I won’t set a deadline for these corrections, but we have quite a few manuscripts accepted for publication, (2) so the sooner I receive the revised version, the sooner the paper goes into the queue.
(3) [name of place] is mostly sunny, though distinctly cold for spring. (letter #18)

In letter #19 we have (1) a confirmation of acceptance, (2) giving encouragement and (3) apology for delay.

Example 23

(1) If you do all this, we will certainly publish as soon as possible, (2) as this is an original and very interesting piece of research. (3) Again I must apologise for the delay in getting the reports. (letter #19).

Summary of schematic structure

To summarize this analysis of the schematic structure of the letters, while a prototypical structure based upon the four moves can be seen to underlie all of the examples, in some aspects there are degrees of variation. Of particular importance, from the point of view of the contributor, are cases of embedding of parts or all of move 2, ‘conveying the decision’, within move 1, ‘preparing for the decision’, or within move 4, ‘signing off’; and second, where the communicative intention of the editor in move 2, ‘conveying the decision’, is not clear (as in example 15, for instance). Where either of these two phenomena occur, we hypothesize, contributors may experience difficulties in determining the communicative intention of the editor.

Two sample letters

Having outlined the move structure of the letters in general terms, we will now look at two letters in detail. The first has been selected because we consider it to be quite close to the prototypical schematic structure. The second has been chosen because some of its schematic features are more complex.

Text 1 (Letter #6)

Dear . . .
I have now had the two reports on your manuscript entitled . . . I enclose these.
As you will see, both are essentially positive but the longer of the two makes some helpful suggestions for improvement. So I think that this article will be acceptable after you have revised it taking the suggestions of the reports and this letter into account.
What you have done very effectively is to use X’s model and also . . . analysis to show how the two differ from one another. I find that a number of people are now using X’s work to provide a link between X and Y. I wonder if it would be possible to say a little (and only a little as the article is already on the long side) about why the analysis of . . . is a
useful tool and also something about a few of the problems and limitations of using the system. One limitation is that the model only deals with . . . one problem that we have found is the difficulty of . . . I also agree with the longer report where it suggests that you need to say more about the actual . . . why you chose them etc. The figures about . . . which you provide in Table 1 are useful, but I wonder whether anything is really gained by the inclusion of two extra . . . I also think you need to address the point about . . . if you can.

I also agree with the point made in the longer report about your use of . . . I’m afraid that I find your discussion of the differences between X and Y a bit vague. I find that I need more precise conclusions.

The points of style referred to in the shorter report are:
p. 3 . . .
p. 5 . . .
p. 12 . . .
p. 17 . . .
I also agree with the long report where it says that it is too late to use . . . Best to use the full name throughout.
I look forward to receiving a revised version. There is no deadline as such, but you might like to aim at mid-July at the latest.

With best wishes
Anonymous

The schematic structure of letter #6 (Text 1) can be analysed as follows:

Move 1: preparing the reader for the decision
Step 1 (obligatory) referring to the submission:
I have now had the two reports on your manuscript entitled . . . I enclose these.

Step 3 (optional) interpreting reviewers’ reports:
As you will see, both are essentially positive but the longer of the two makes some helpful suggestions for improvement.

Move 2: conveying the decision (Accept subject to revisions of reviewers and editor)
So I think that this article will be acceptable after you have revised it taking the suggestions of the reports and this letter into account.

Move 3: making recommendations for revision
Step 1 referring reader to reviewers’ recommendations and Step 2 making editorial recommendations (steps 1 and 2 embedded within each other)

Paragraphs 3–7
Move 4: signing off

Step 1 confirming decision

I look forward to receiving a revised version.

Step 8 setting deadline for revised version

There is no deadline as such, but you might like to aim at mid-July at the latest.

The reason we consider this letter to be fairly prototypical is because it possesses each of the four moves in sequence and within each move a number of steps. There is no reordering or embedding of moves away from the prototypical structure, as we have defined it.

The next letter (#29) (Text 2), by way of contrast, does exhibit a number of features which diverge from the prototypical structure.

Text 2 (Letter #29)

Dear . . .

I enclose the comments on your and X’s paper. I must apologise for the delay in sending these, but the second report has only just arrived.

As you will see, both feel that there is much of interest in the paper, but have a number of criticisms. The first report focuses on your use of X, arguing that you have failed to give serious consideration to the growing literature in this area. You could fairly easily remedy this, but I suspect that you do not wish to make this a focus of the paper. I suggest that you look carefully at the use of the term X in the title and the use of the term Y elsewhere in the paper to ensure that you do not upset that sub-culture.

The second report comments favourably on your use of the X literature, but implies that X may not be the most exciting X around for research purposes . . . Again it strikes me that your purpose was not to do a detailed analysis of X, but to . . .

I agree with the point made in the second report that the survey of the literature may be too long. I would suggest cutting this to the key references and submitting a much shorter article which could fit well into the journal as a Research Notes article. I think that you should emphasise even more than you do that your concern is the differences between X and Y and the very nice point you make about the pedagogical implications in the conclusion.

One point of detail: how do you relate X, Y and Z? You define the first two, but not Z. Is it the same as . . .?

To summarise: I am prepared to offer publication, preferably as a Research Note, provided that you take on board the bulk of the suggestions made in the reports as amended by my own comments. I do not really a (sic) full discussion of X, but we need the paper to cover itself in that regard.

With best wishes
The schematic structure of this letter can thus be analysed as follows:

**Move 1: preparing the reader for the decision**

**Step 1 (obligatory) referring to the submission:**

I enclose the comments on your and X’s paper.

**Step 2 (optional) apologizing for a delay in responding:**

I must apologise for the delay in sending these, but the second report has only just arrived.

**Step 3 (optional) interpreting reviewers’ reports. This step begins with the statement:**

As you will see, both [reviewers] feel that there is much of interest in the paper, but have a number of criticisms.

This step 3 then continues for two paragraphs which refer to the main criticisms. Embedded within this interpretation of the reports, however, are recommendations for how to overcome the shortcomings noted by the reviewers, ‘move 3—making recommendations for revision’. The insertion of move 3 at this stage acts at the same time as an anticipatory signal for move 2 ‘conveying the decision’, for it is likely that the editor would only make recommendations for revision if s/he was willing to consider a revised version. The decision is in fact subsequently conveyed overtly, as follows:

To summarise: I am prepared to offer publication, preferably as a Research Note, provided that you take on board the bulk of the suggestions made in the reports as amended by my own comments.

It is not clear to us whether this should be interpreted as move 2, ‘conveying the decision’, occurring in a marked position, or as step 1 of move 4, ‘confirm the decision’. The expression ‘to summarise’ suggests the latter interpretation, but, although claiming to summarize, the editor has not in fact until now conveyed the decision. Nevertheless, retrospectively, what we have interpreted as anticipatory signals of an offer to submit a revised version in move 1 are indeed to be taken as such, this ‘summary’ in the signing off slot makes clear.

To summarize, letter #6 (except for the two embedded steps of move 3) was notable for the clear delineation of each of the four moves. In letter #29, however, we see a blurring of the boundaries of the individual moves. Move 3, ‘recommendations for revision’, is embedded in an extended move 1, step 3 ‘interpreting reviewers’ reports’; while move 2, ‘conveying the decision’, does not follow move 1, but can be interpreted as occurring in marked position before move 4, or as the ‘confirm decision’ slot of move 4.
LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE EDITORIAL LETTERS: THE INTERPERSONAL DIMENSION

In our discussion of schematic structure we have focused on the transparency or otherwise of the deployment of the moves and steps. From the perspective of communicative efficiency such transparency is likely to be valued highly. At the same time, however, there is a need to consider the interpersonal dimension—maintaining good relations and avoiding face-threatening communicative behaviour. There is thus a trade-off between the Gricean maxims of efficient communication (quality, quantity, relation, and manner) (Grice 1975) and Leech’s (1983) politeness principle, with its emphasis on the need to maintain positive human relations. It is to aspects of linguistic politeness, as manifested in the corpus of letters, that we now turn our attention.

For us striking features of the letters were:

1. their personal nature;
2. the use of politeness strategies.

In our discussion we must bear in mind that the letters were written by one person and this may account for the similarities between letters, that is, a question of personal style rather than genre convention.

Personal nature of letters

The personal nature is brought home very forcefully by the frequency of the use of ‘I’. (Frequency data will be given in raw numbers and standardized per 1,000 words for comparative purposes, rounded up or down to the nearest whole number (see Biber 1988: 14)). A word frequency count showed that ‘I’ was the second most frequent lexical item in the letters, coming immediately after ‘the’ with 614 occurrences (31 per thousand). Given that the average length of each letter is 373 words, this means roughly on average over 11 times per letter. ‘[A]m’, ‘my’ and ‘me’ are also frequent with occurrences of 107 (5 per thousand), 39 (2 per thousand) and 52 (3 per thousand). ‘[Y]ou’ is the sixth most frequent word in the corpus with 481 occurrences (24 per thousand), meaning it occurs over 9 times per letter; ‘your’ has 149 occurrences (8 per thousand), meaning nearly 3 occurrences per letter and ‘yours’ has 34 (2 per thousand) occurrences. The high frequency of ‘think’ at 96 (5 per thousand) (nearly twice per letter, on average) is also an important interpersonal feature. A concordance of this item reveals that it is most often used in the construction ‘I think you + modal verb (should, need to, could, can)’, primarily in a directive function, in providing recommendations, such as:

I think that you should focus much more on these points . . .
I think you need to take a little time . . .
I think you could draw a parallel . . .
I think you can cut the last part . . .
Although these are examples of directives, we feel that this is a positive feature of the letters, indicating the concern on the part of the editor that contributors be given good guidance in what action to take regarding their manuscript.

Use of politeness strategies

Perhaps the most interesting linguistic feature for us is the use of politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987), particularly in the ‘conveying decision’ move. Clearly the decision to reject is a fairly heavy Face Threatening Act (FTA) to the positive face of the authors and will be redressed through the use of phrases that save the authors’ positive face. The use of the phrase ‘I’m afraid’ is common, as in:

Example 24

I’m afraid that we reach the unanimous decision that there are problems with the study and therefore we cannot recommend publication. (letter #14)

‘[A]fraid’ has an occurrence of 20 (1 per thousand) in the corpus. As an indication of its mitigating function, this item occurred in all of the six rejection letters in the corpus except one, with two occurrences in two of these letters. Another similar face-saving item is ‘sorry’:

Example 25

I am sorry that I have to bring you disappointing news. (letter #22)

‘Sorry’ has an occurrence of 17 (1 per thousand). A lexically related word to ‘sorry’, ‘apologise’, also occurs 8 times.

One strategy is to praise the manuscript initially as a lead-in and a softening of the blow of the rejection:

Example 26

I have now read through your manuscript entitled . . . and find much of interest. It would, however, need quite a bit of adaptation if it is to be suitable for publication in ESPJ. (letter #28)

The ‘making recommendations for revision’ move in this same letter also involves an FTA affecting the negative face of the authors. The editor is imposing on the authors by requesting them to make certain changes or additions. This move is typically mitigated through the use of the modal ‘could’ and ‘would’, as in the following examples:
Example 27

I would suggest that you have a look at recent editions of the journal and perhaps also at Genre Analysis by John Swales. (letter #28)

Example 28

You could fairly easily remedy this . . . (letter #29).

‘Need’ is also frequently used in making recommendations, with 104 occurrences (5 per thousand), for example:

Example 29

You need to find an aspect of your results that make them distinctive . . . (letter #12)

The modals, ‘would’ and ‘could’ are very frequently used; they are the 24th and 43rd most frequent items in the corpus with occurrences of 122 (6 per thousand) and 67 (3 per thousand) respectively.

A key question here (as suggested earlier in this paper) is whether the editor is seriously considering publication after the changes have been made or whether the suggestions are made more to encourage the authors to appraise their research and perhaps take a different direction.

Also interesting is the way in which the phrasing of the letters that were offering resubmission gave indications as to whether the editor was really expecting and wanting a revised version of the paper. The way that the following ‘interpret reviewers’ reports’ step in the ‘preparing for decision’ move is phrased gives—in our opinion—a clear indication that a revision is expected:

Example 30

As you will see, both are essentially positive but the longer of the two makes some helpful suggestions for improvement. So I think that this article will be acceptable after you have revised it taking the suggestions of the reports and this letter into account. (letter #6)

This is confirmed in the ‘confirm decision’ step of the signing off move:

Example 31

I look forward to receiving a revised version. (letters #6, #31, #34, #41, and #46)

We can contrast this with another letter from the corpus, which invites resubmission, but does so in a way that indicates that the editor feels that the research reported on in the current manuscript is insufficient to merit publication and needs to be developed radically before there will be any
chance of a revised manuscript being accepted. This was a manuscript that was not sent out for review. The editor’s attitude is made clear in the ‘make editorial recommendations’ step of ‘making recommendations for revision’ move:

Example 32

I have read your manuscript, but I am afraid that it is not full or strong enough to be published in ESPJ. It is interesting and I am sure that the teaching you describe is effective, but the ideas are not really original enough to merit publication. The paper is also rather short. (letter #13)

Positive statements are made—‘it is interesting’, ‘teaching is effective’—but these are outweighed by the negative statements—‘not full enough’, ‘not strong enough’, ‘not really original enough’. When we come to the ‘conveying decision’ move (see example 33), the hedging contained in the ways that the FTA of the decision is addressed gives a clear—to us, at any rate—indication that the editor is not really expecting a revision. This does not mean that he would not be pleased to receive one, but rather that it is left to the author to decide whether it is worth spending the time carrying out the considerable amount of work required:

Example 33

If you would like to develop your research and write a more extensive paper, we would be happy to consider it for the journal. (letter #13)

We believe that the message is reasonably clear in the above letter. In a number of letters contained in the corpus, however, the decision appears—to our embarrassment—much less clear.

As another example of confusing signals, consider the following extracts from letter #12. Early in the letter, the ‘refer to submission’ step of move 1 has a statement that the editor is enclosing a copy of the paper with his suggestions for rephrasing—a clear signal that a revised version is anticipated, one would think. This seems to be contradicted, however, in the ‘interpreting reviewers’ reports’ step, as follows:

Example 34

The report and my own reading of the paper indicate that the paper is not ready for publication in ESPJ. (letter #12)

Bad news here, but the letter goes on to the following ‘offer resubmission’ option in the ‘conveying decision’ move, which mixes good and bad news:
Example 35

We are very interested in publishing articles about . . . and one from [country X] would be very welcome. But you have not really come up with findings that have anything particularly different from previous research in this area. You need to find an aspect of your results that make them distinctive . . . (letter #12)

The editor would like an article on the chosen topic and from the country of the author, but the author’s contribution is not good enough. The possible contradictions are reinforced in the ‘signing off’ move where a much revised version of the article is invited:

Example 36

We would be interested in receiving a much revised version of this article. (letter #12)

Although the editor believes that the ultimate decision is made fairly clear, there is none the less considerable ambiguity. The reader will have to balance the positive and negative points made to realize that the editor is not really expecting a revised version but would none the less be very pleased to receive one. In this case, however, he has not heard from the authors!

CONCLUSION

We have presented through the analysis of the genre structure and the politeness strategies used in the editorial letters a summary of the tactics used by a co-editor of English for Specific Purposes Journal to convey the decision about whether a submitted manuscript is acceptable for publication as an article. We believe that the picture that emerges is that of an editor anxious to make clear what he thinks about the manuscript, and to clarify for the author the comments made by the reviewers.

In certain cases our analysis has revealed that the letters are not as straightforward as they might be. Occasionally the reason seems to be a lack of clarity in the letters. But the strongest reason seems to be the desire to save the addressee’s face when presenting criticisms and suggestions for revision, which results in the extensive use of hedging devices by the editor. This otherwise laudable intent may in fact lead to confusion.

There is of course a danger that we are, for the purposes of discussion and clarification of the genre, exaggerating the problem of comprehension. Indeed, we believe that most authors are capable of understanding the intent of the editorial letters and the guidance that they provide about reading the reviews and revising the manuscript. We must affirm again that because our study is of the letters of one single editor we cannot make any generalizations concerning the editorial letter genre. Nevertheless we believe that our study may go some way towards demystifying the editorial process
and contribute to our understanding of the nature and function of the genre in question. At least we now have a baseline against which further research can be measured, the next step, of course, being a study of a corpus of letters from a range of journals.

(Final version received March 2002)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No CPHK 769/95H). We would like to acknowledge the help of our research assistants, Kennis Ng and Josephine Lo. We also acknowledge the helpful comments of three anonymous reviewers and the editors of Applied Linguistics.

REFERENCES


Hamp-Lyons, E. 1997. ‘Editors’ reinterpretation of submission reviews: How occluded is the genre?’ in G. Braine (Chair): Current Research in Academic Writing in a Second
Language. Colloquium conducted at TESOL Convention, March, Orlando, FL, USA.


